

**W**hat theory can be advanced to explicate the propensity of a significant proportion of individuals engaged in the scholarly profession to manufacture writerly texts that exhibit a more substantial resemblance to the technicality-replete discursive formations of androidal entities than to the quotidian narrative artefacts of the non-academic populace?

Or to put it another way: Why do so many academics write like jargon-spouting robots rather than human beings with a story to tell?

As the author of a book optimistically titled *Stylish Academic Writing*, I frequently hear versions of the following lament from PhD students and early-career colleagues: "I can't write more clearly, more engagingly, for a non-academic audience, in a personal voice because if I do I won't get promoted, my colleagues won't respect me, people won't think I'm intelligent, peer reviewers would disapprove."

Is it true that academics are compelled by forces beyond their control to produce wordy, wooden, unreadable prose? I have asked this

question of successful researchers and editors from across the disciplines and around the world. It turns out that most academics' excuses for writing badly are based not on facts but on myths. Here are some of the most pervasive.

**L** **Myth 1: Academics are not allowed to write outside of strictly prescribed disciplinary formats** "Not allowed"? By whom?

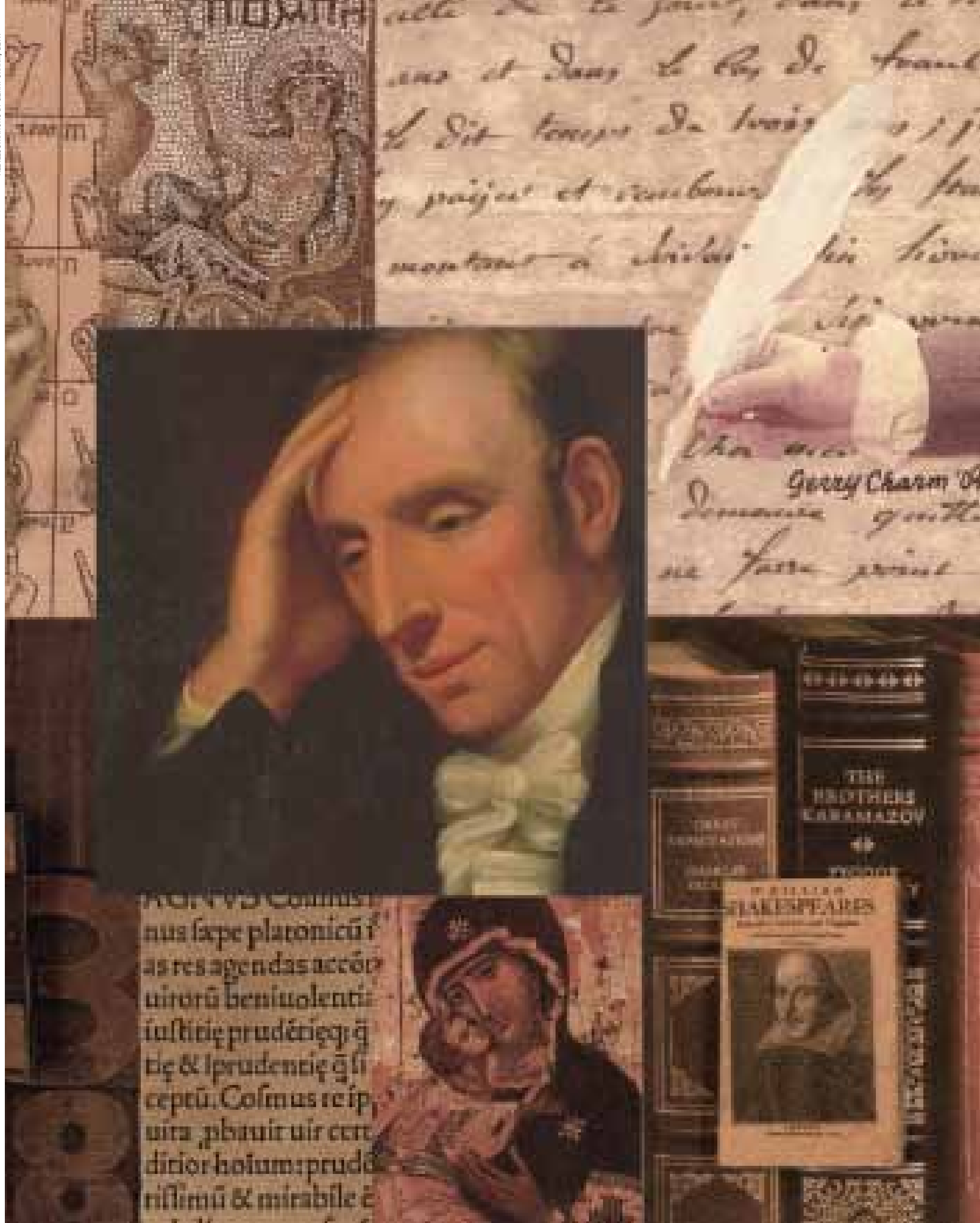
Academic writing is a matter of making appropriate choices, not of following ironclad rules. When confident writers push back against disciplinary conventions, those conventions often shift to accommodate the new style.

John Dumay, senior lecturer in accounting at the University of Sydney, recalls the time he submitted an article filled with personal pronouns to a journal dominated by impersonal prose: "The reviewers loved the paper. They thought it was fantastic. It was all ready to get published and the editor came back to me and said, 'Oh, you're writing in the first

# Narrative trust

Dare to write clearly and engagingly whatever the audience, **Helen Sword** urges junior and senior scholars alike in a myth-busting guide to good academic prose. You have nothing to lose but your enunciatory modality

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person. We only publish in the third person. You have to change this’. I thought, ‘Are you kidding me?’ It took me half a day to go back through it, making sure it was in the present tense and writing everything in the third person. Instead of ‘we’, I would write ‘the researchers’. But I didn’t like that. I thought it constrained what I did. So the next paper I wrote for him, I purposely left it in my own style, because this paper was a literature review where I was making a very personal argument, and I stuck with it. Again the paper got accepted, and this time, the editor didn’t say boo. So maybe I pushed his buttons a little bit.”



**Myth 2: Academic writing has to be impersonal and objective**

Says who? None of the major academic style guides – for example, the *Oxford Style Manual*, *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the manuals published by the American Psychological Association, the American Chemical Society, the Council of Science Editors, the Modern Humanities Research Association and the Modern Language Association – explicitly recommends

that authors should avoid personal pronouns. Yet the myth persists, especially among scientists and social scientists, that the words “I” and “we” must never appear in serious academic writing.

Tim Appenzeller, chief magazine editor at *Nature*, urges academics to loosen up and let themselves into the picture: “Academics feel they have to keep themselves out of their writing. It’s part of what I think is scientists’ self-image – that science is this completely objective process. So they write that way, with a passive voice. No sense that there was a mind behind the research – who thought this, who tried that – and I think that really works against the accessibility and quality of academic writing.”

“It’s more than the ‘I’. It’s the sense that it is a personal exploration. A bit more of that feeling, I think, makes scientific writing a lot more approachable.”



**Myth 3: Academic writing has to be difficult**

We can all name a few famous academics who have attracted a sycophantic following despite, or perhaps even

because of, the determined opacity of their prose. Far from being universally revered, however, these purveyors of disciplinary jargon are often taken to task by their peers. The journal *Philosophy and Literature* even used to run a Bad Writing Contest to flush out sentences such as this one by the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha: “If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to ‘normalize’ formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.”

John Heilbron, vice-chancellor emeritus and professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Berkeley, advises early career academics to resist the kind of unconscious imitation that can lead to intellectual stagnation.

“One of the worst things you can do in my opinion is to write in the standard, jargon-laden manner of the discipline,” he says. “It’s so easy to do, because you read in your field, and there’s a certain vocabulary, a certain way

of saying things that you see over and over again, and it’s hard to get out of your system. So when you go to write, you have these ready-minted phrases that you put down and try to arrange in the style you’re accustomed to. In fact, it’s something you’ve downloaded unintentionally from the standard literature, and which you think is the way forward, but it’s just a way to a dead end.”



**Myth 4: Academic writing has to be dense**

Jargon is not the only barrier to understanding. Elizabeth Knoll, executive editor at large at Harvard University Press, denounces the wordy, overly cautious style of many scholarly writers: “They take too long to get to the point, and they don’t quite get to the point. They over-explain. They use too many examples. They repeat themselves. They are a little circuitous, and even if they have piled up an awful lot of evidence to make a point strongly – as strongly as they could – they muffle themselves. Sometimes they muffle themselves with just too many words. It’s like the snowfall that obliterates all the features of the landscape. A snowfall of words that just cuts out any sound.”

Brian Boyd, distinguished professor of English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, calls standard academese a “porridge of abstractions” whose glutinous texture is best avoided by stylish writers: “You’ve got to be able to swim comfortably in the porridge as an academic but I try to offer fresher seas.”



**Myth 5: Famous academics can afford to write in a more personal, engaging style; early career researchers can’t**

Do conventional academic writers suddenly wake up one day and decide to write stylishly? Occasionally, yes. More often, those “famous academics” who write with imagination and flair turn out to have been risk-takers and rule-breakers all along.

I asked Douglas Hofstadter, College of Arts and Sciences distinguished professor of cognitive science and comparative literature at Indiana University and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1979 book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*,



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whether he believes that only tenured (or otherwise secure) academics can take stylistic risks. “That’s just baloney,” he said. “I wrote the first two drafts of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* when I was a complete nonentity – I was a mere graduate student. Writing such a down-to-earth, analogy-filled, image-filled, humour-filled book didn’t paralyse my career. Hardly! In fact, it had the completely opposite effect. I got tenure very rapidly, and then I was free to follow any intellectual pathways that I felt intensely pulled by.”

Meanwhile James Shapiro, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, notes that job security seldom leads to a sudden fairy-tale transformation.

“It’s not like you’ve been kissed and turned into a prince when you’ve been a frog all along,” he says.

“If you have wriggled in a kind of academic way for the seven or eight years leading to tenure, and have not made any effort to change that style, it’s probably impossible to do so at that point. So the fantasy that you’re allowed to be free and express yourself more freely when you receive tenure is just that – a fantasy.”

**Myth 6: Some academics find writing easy**  
Just as some people are born with an aptitude for music or sports, some academics possess an innate flair for language.

Even the most talented wordsmiths, however, devote considerable time and energy to perfecting their craft.

Like the industrious poet of W.B. Yeats’ *Adam’s Curse*, they put great effort into producing work that will appear effortless: “A line will take us hours maybe; Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”

Ludmilla Jordanova, professor of modern history at King’s College London, urges her doctoral students to regard writing and editing as artisanal activities.

“Think of it as being a potter or a woodworker or whatever; pay attention to the way things are put together,” she suggests. “Do adjectives work well here? Am I using the right kind of verb?”

Janelle Jenstad, associate professor of English at the University of Victoria in



Canada, takes the artisan metaphor a step further, using terminology borrowed from the building trade to describe the writer’s craft.

“If you’re cutting a piece of metal to make a shape, the very first thing you do is give it a ‘roughing cut’, where you just get rid of most of the excess metal. Once you’ve done that, then you do your ‘finishing cut’.

“I’ve applied that in all aspects of my life; I’ve used it a lot in my writing and with my students when they come in for editing sessions with me. We’ll start to wrestle with some little detail, and then I’ll say, ‘Hang on, we’re not finished with our roughing cut yet. We don’t know what the shape of this project is yet, so let’s not niddle over the details. We’ll save that for a finishing cut at the end’.”

**Myth 7: Academics who write for a popular audience are doomed to be scorned and derided by their peers**

This one is not entirely a myth. Academics who successfully “cross to the other side” do indeed sometimes encounter dismissive responses (or is it jealousy?) from their colleagues. Yet when asked to name a piece of writing of which

they are especially proud, a striking number of the academics I have interviewed point to books and articles published for non-specialist audiences.

Sun Kwok, professor of physics and dean of science at the University of Hong Kong, explains that the benefits flow both ways.

“When you write for a layman, you put yourself in a totally different mindset; you really think about the research,” he says. “The process of looking for a simple explanation actually helps me understand the subject better. It makes me put things into context and say ‘What is this really about and why is it important?’.”

Carlo Rotella, a professor of English at Boston College who publishes regularly in the popular press, believes that academics are slowly waking up to the advantages of writing for multiple audiences.

“The older model of ‘crossing over to the trade side’ is outmoded professionally and intellectually too. It’s not that useful a model. You get a kind of cross-training from just understanding what a genre is and how a genre works. It’s as if you’re making movies or creating music – there’s a certain way to play a slow blues and a certain way to play a prom jam; they’re different.

“Writing for different audiences is good for your writing chops. I think of it as playing the accordion – squeeze it down and open it out.”

Academics who ignore these prevailing myths will find themselves in good company. Scores of successful researchers have built distinguished scholarly careers on a foundation of stylish writing.

Some writers may encounter the occasional speed bump, of course: an editor who favours pretentiousness over precision, a reviewer who pooh-poohs popular success. But what is the point of being an academic, I ask my angst-ridden younger colleagues, if you’re unwilling to take intellectual risks? And how can you hope to become a path-breaking researcher if you’re afraid to push stylistic boundaries and question disciplinary norms?

If we want our work to be consequential – to have an impact in the world – we owe it to our readers to write with conviction, craft and style. ●

Helen Sword is associate professor of higher education at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and author of *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012).

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